

Teaching English in Elementary School

By Joel Carter and Eric Rose

I. What are we teaching? (Hi Friends/Eigo Noto and why English is fun)

1.) **Curricu-whatnow?**

The “requirements” for English language education in elementary schools are set by MEXT and are the same nationwide for all elementary schools in Japan. However, these requirements are rather vague. They specify that 5th and 6th year classes should have foreign language activities for 45 minutes per week, and that these activities should familiarize the students with the sounds of English and help them to develop their communication skills. They **do not** specify a specific curriculum or any means of testing/verification of the student’s development.

2.) **Hi Friends!/Eigo Noto and other ways to commit suicide**

Though MEXT does not specify a specific curriculum, it does offer a suggested course of study for 5th and 6th grade English classes. The *Hi, Friends!* and previously *Eigo Noto* series of textbooks are based off this suggested course of study. Many elementary schools use these books (and their ancillary materials) for the required foreign language activities. Though the books can be helpful in providing various activities and in guiding the course of foreign language studies throughout the year, many teachers (ALTs and HRTs) find the materials too sparse and/or too dry to provide the curriculum in its entirety.

II. None of these things are like the other ones! (Differences in elementary school education)

1.) **You want me to do what?**

Though MEXT and the JET program both seem to have guidelines saying that the ALT and HRT should “team-teach” the foreign language activities, with the ALT being T2 and the HRT being T1, in reality, most elementary school ALTs find that they are expected to perform the roll of T1 throughout their classes. In some situations the ALT is expected to teach the class entirely on their own.

2.) **I teach at that school once a day/week/month/year/decade**

The number of times an ALT will teach a given elementary school class can vary widely. Some ALTs will teach each 5th and 6th year class once a week, providing all 36 foreign language activity classes in a year. More often elementary school visits will be more rare. In these situations, it can vary as

whether or not the students have foreign language activities when the ALT is not there and how effect those intervening classes are. Depending on the situation an ALT will need to plan accordingly, keeping track of where his/her students are in their studies, and what areas have and have not yet been covered.

III. How to avoid being murdered by 12 year olds (Preparation for class and teaching techniques)

1.) Constant vigilance

It is very important not only that an ALT know what classes they are teaching and what they intend to teach in those classes, but also that they have prepared that necessary materials. Elementary ALTs often teach a multiple schools and will need to keep track of what schools have what materials and equipment available.

2.) There's a reason JHS ALTs prefer the shogako

The most important aspect of teaching English in elementary school is to keep it fun. There is not set curriculum, so feel free to play lots of games and goof off with students. The primary goal should be to make the students comfortable with and excited about the prospect of communicating in another language.

3.) Do it right! But don't be a jerk

ALTs are important in elementary school classrooms because unlike in JHS and SHS, the homeroom teacher is not likely to know English very well. For this reason, it is important that ALT model proper pronunciation and grammar in the classroom. That being said, 10 year olds are not preparing for the TOEFL. ALTs should not be picky about minor pronunciation/grammar mistakes if the students are having fun and putting in honest effort.

4.) Teach English, not funny noises

Try to write as much as possible on the blackboard with translations of words and sentences into Japanese. The better the students understand the specifics of what they are saying, the more they will be willing to experiment and play with what they've learned.